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AUTHOR Donovan, L. G.
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ABSTRACT

The Natural Approach to second language instruction has theoretical flaws and tends to reverse teaching methods that have been used successfully for many years. The approach exaggerates the presumed failure of previous language programs and ignores some important characteristics of children's language learning processes. It assumes that explicit error correction is ineffective for children and adults. This theory is not firmly established. In addition, in suggesting that the vocabulary and structures for instruction be chosen for their communicative values and not for frequency of usage, and thus not be limited in extent, the method reverses sound and practical materials selections made through necessity since the 1960s. Second language instruction still requires a solid body of well-chosen frequently-used words, sentences, and morphological components that can be thoroughly mastered, frequently reviewed, and supplemented when necessary to prepare students to confront the random nature of real- world language needs. What is of primary importance is to adapt programs to the students, their needs, and their backgrounds and to provide competent, dynamic, and thoughtful teachers while avoiding the pitfall of making all classrooms into a testing ground for new versions of old theories. (MSE)

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L. G. Donovan
University of Calgary

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A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE NATURAL APPROACH

L. G. Donovan
University of Calgary

The history of language methodology is fraught with attempts to discover and apply an ideal solution to the difficult problems of teaching and learning a second or foreign language. This has resulted in a series of radical changes on the theoretical level, the series method by Gouin, the phonetic approach, the direct method, linguistic structures and so on. Instead of building progressively on successfull experience, we tend to discard from time to time previous theory in favor of a radically different solution to an old problem. There remain however, in the final analysis, two opposing schools of thought: those who feel that a study of grammar by means of example sentences is essential from the very beginning and, on the other hand, those who favor teaching the language in the early and intermediate stages through meaning and by oral usage or practice. After more than twenty-five years of successful second language teaching both at high school and in university, coupled with observations of a number of bilingual school programs in Canada and Europe, there is no doubt in my mind that the latter approach provides the best, but not the only, environment for successful language learning. The recently developed Natural Approach[1], which belongs in the second category which I favor and which has received much publicity in recent years, tends to reverse for theoretical reasons, methods which have been successfully used for a number of years. This paper is therefore a comment on some aspects of the Direct Method, followed by general suggestions with respect to methodology and its application in the classroom.

Having based their Approach on five psychological hypotheses[2], Krashen and Terrell exaggerate immensely the presumed failure of all previous language programs[3], then select a limited number of characteristics from children's first language acquisition while neglecting others which are essential to the process. In the first instance they neglect the fact that children spend an immense amount of time learning their mother tongue in circumstances that can never be duplicated in the classroom. By way of example, consider the following: A child of five and one half years of age can manage oral language fairly well but cannot venture into abstract thought. At that point in his or her life, approximately twenty-one thousand hours of individualized instruction have occurred. In other words, after more than twenty thousand hours devoted to acquisition and practice, these "ideal" learners have no real ability in the important area of reading and writing.[4] By the age of twelve, after some fifty thousand hours, children cannot read with understanding the same texts that we put before our mature students with considerable success, after less than six hundred hours. Is it not possible that we could reach some degree of excellence with older learners if we added forty-nine thousand hours to the program?

Having chosen to consider children as their model, Krashen and Terrell make three suggestions of particular importance: i. the target language should be the language of instruction (as in the Direct Method), ii. the vocabulary and structures are to be chosen for communication, not for frequency of usage and

than a half hour of enforced study. Parents are encouraged to structure home study so that one point is mastered perfectly each week, and they are encouraged to plan the study session so that materials move from the simpler to the more challenging material and end with the more accessible concepts.[4] I have found that workshop sessions structured on this same pattern have the most success. Home review is aided by an audio cassette program for additional listening and by take-home suggestions that actively involve the child in using the language at home.

Finally, I have been recently encouraged by the motivation that results by setting "recital" or performance goals.[5] Group recital before a public audience seems to provide the most motivation. Individual recital is encouraged although it is completely voluntary, as is all individual response. "Recital" lends itself especially to important transition points in the workshop program, such as the "halfway" or "last session." I encourage the children to recite as a group for the parents at that time and to recite individually if they wish. This is a good device for motivating review and practice and is especially successful when rewarded by a following party or picnic. I also suggest that children recite in French for supportive adults (such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) either in person or by mailing a recording.

Although contact time in this workshop has been limited to only one sixty- to seventy-five-minute session per week over ten to twelve weeks, learning results have been encouraging. This program has proved to be an effective and pleasant way of integrating community and college concern for foreign language study.

Notes

[1]Shinichi Suzuki, "Children Can Develop Their Ability to the Highest Standard," in The Suzuki Concept: An Introduction to a Successful Method for Early Music Education, ed. Elizabeth Mills and Sr. Therese Cecile Murphy, (Berkeley and San Francisco: Diablo Press, 1973), pp. 10-11.

[2]Suzuki, p.12.

[3]Suzuki, p.12.

[4]Mary Craig Powell suggests this approach in "Ten Points on Practice," Suzuki World, 2, No. 5 (1983), pp. 4-5.

[5]As suggested by Powell, p. 4.

should not therefore be restricted in extent (again like the Direct Method). iii. "errors" should not be corrected in explicit fashion. The first point has been much debated, but most of us would agree that the ideal is to teach in the target language as much as we can without causing undue tension in the learner or in the classroom. The other two postulates give us more difficulty.

The "avoidance of explicit correction" hypothesis is derived from the observations of children. It is noted that explicit correction of children's speech habits seems to be ineffective.[5] Both the observation itself and its application to adult learning can be questioned. While it is true that attempts by parents to modify and improve on children's utterances do not seem to have any immediate effect, no-one can show that these corrections do not play an important part in later improvement. In addition, children are often subjected to explicit and effective correction procedures in another manner. When they engage in interactive play, they imitate adults who, in their view, have power. They first use physical strength to exert pressure on their peers: fisty-cuffs, pushing and grabbing. A second way of gaining power, more acceptable to supervisors and to parents, is through language behaviour. The child who has "caught on" leads the group in making fun of or in ostracising the unfortunate child who differs from the majority in his or her manner of pronouncing words or in using language forms. This peer-group pressure, rough, direct and sometimes quite cruel, is linguistically one of the great levelers. Because of it, children who move into a speech community that differs from their own will acquire "native-sounding" language habits whereas adults often will not. This difference arises, not out of great differences in language and world; they do not seek to modify their behaviour. ii. children can be highly motivated to belong to their group and to be accepted by their peers; iii. this need to belong, forces them to accept the direct and ruthless "correction" by other children of tiny variations in their own speech behaviour whereas adults have no effective access to any corrective procedures outside the classroom. Even glaring variations will not be commented on by other adults.

Several points emerge from these considerations. The child's world and natural environment are not like those of the adult or mature adolescent who comes to the language classroom. The effectiveness of explicit correction is indeed significant in children who often strive mightily to be like other children or like members of their family. Our own methods and conclusions cannot be dogmatically established from partial observations of children's behaviour and learning. Some of our students can make considerable progress, in pronunciation for example, if we teach them explicitly in an effective, considerate and comprehensible manner.

What is true is that we can gain ideas about language learning by watching children learn and by choosing those procedures that have been useful in the past regardless of the methodological label attached to them. After many years of working with colleagues in serious and successful programs using a variety of methods, it is clear that success in the language classroom is not derived from adherence to this or that theoretical dogma, but rather from careful attention th the affective climate of the classroom and to the mature learner's need for a feeling of continued successful progress. Adults learn faster than children. They arrive with a set of linguistic structures and competences already in place. It is neither possible nor reasonable to teach as though they were

reborn children. We must select out the many procedures that work and then use the abilities they possess (including logic and analytical skills), while attending to the affective climate of the learning process. Some students will imitate sounds and structures well, others need specific and intensive training with attention not only to acquisition, but also to understanding and to learning. This latter group of students ought not to be neglected simply because they have not been included in the theoretical model of one particular decade.

The second point of greatest difficulty in the application of the Natural Approach has to do with the choice of material to be taught. It is here that previous methods and insights are being modified to the greatest extent. After using the Direct Method in Saskatchewan in the early sixties[6] (the real one, not the caricature of it that is described by Krashen and Terrel), it became evident that the amount of material was excessive and that some choices had to be made in order to permit constant review on one hand, and to allow the students to communicate effectively in the real world, while limiting their actual vocabulary and structures for learning purposes. The obvious solution, which was being thought out at Saint-Cloud in France by Gougenheim and others, was to choose items from a serious count of the most frequently used words and structures to be found in the usual spoken language. These limitations, which occur as a matter of course with children who are restricted by lack of maturity and by the narrow milieu in which most activities occur for the first ten thousand hours of language acquisition, have served us well to the present time. It will be unfortunate if we now return via the Natural Approach to the earlier problems of the Direct Method. Our programs will suffer if they contain a very large number of items chosen because they allow students to communicate but with no attention to the teachers' and students' future ability to review them and to ensure that acquisition really has occurred to a profound degree.

This, in my view, is the most serious shortcoming of the Natural Approach. By appearing to us disguised as something new, with terminology that obscures both practical and methodological considerations, we are being taken back twenty years to problems that we had with the Direct Method and that we solved in a variety of ways. Instead of improving upon existing programs and methods, we are once more being persuaded to discard previous gains in favor of a new theory which solves some problems while creating a host of new difficulties. The result is that we will be delayed once more in building comprehensive methods which work in a variety of ways and that, when deceptions re-appear, there will be one more return to the old standby, the grammar translation method that most of us do not want.

Let us not exaggerate the "failures" of previous methods. The acquisition of a second or foreign language is never easy, but, contrary to popular mythology, we have been moderately successful throughout the past one hundred years. In a majority of cases, the principal shortcoming has been too little time. Our methods have often been reasonably satisfactory; the conditions of application have not been. Let us not now be induced to throw away what we have learned from past successes. We know from experience with Voix et Images, as an example, and with the Direct Method that effective teaching is better served if we actually communicate using a small body of well-chosen material and if we organize frequent reviews so that the material is progressively mastered rather than passively understood.

No one doubts that Stephen Krashen has shed light on psychological principles that can be of some use in our classrooms. No one will deny that the idea of using commands and of having students move about, J. Asher's Total Physical Response, which was developed in the mid sixties, ought to be applied as a technique in appropriate circumstances and everyone will agree that Tracy Terrel is an interesting and dynamic teacher. The danger is that, because of these assuredly positive elements in the equation, we will lose sight of long-established insights and well developed classroom activities. Some of the new ideas can be integrated into our present teaching and learning procedures; they are not a panacea that will shorten the long road to successful mastery of a second or third language.

We still require in our programs a solid body of well-chosen frequently used words, sentences and morphological components that can be thoroughly mastered, frequently reviewed and supplemented when necessary with free-ranging material designed to prepare students to confront the random nature of the "real world" and lead them, in certain instances, into authentic works of thought or even literature in the target language at an advanced stage in the program. We must never forget that adults, like children, require patience, a positive learning climate, meaningful communication at their level of linguistic ability, and thousands of repetitions combined with reasonable amounts of time. In order to manage our classrooms with success and to succeed in imparting oral proficiency, we as teachers require small classrooms above all (an absolute maximum of twenty-two students per teacher) and, preferably, concentrated periods of time with only short spaces of "vacation" at the early stages so as to minimize forgetting.

What is of primary importance is to adapt our programs to the students that we have, to their needs and backgrounds, while avoiding the pitfall of making all classrooms into one great experimental laboratory. The purpose of language teaching is to teach the target language, not to serve as a testing ground for "new and improved" versions of old theories. There are no magic solutions, no secret formulae, no incantations that can lead us into the promised land. What we require instead is a variety of well-organized materials, imaginatively presented, with touches of humour, patience and good-will, all of this adapted to the many types of situations that we can create in the classroom. The same program is not suitable for children, for adolescents and for adults.

Finally, with apologies for the cliché, it is virtually impossible to learn a language in a classroom without the assistance of a competent, dynamic and thoughtful teacher who has excellent mastery of the phonetic structure and grammatical features of the target language and a favorable attitude to the people who speak it. Other suggestions can be made with respect to the use of reading materials, video-cassettes, tapes, cultural materials, a language centre and so on but they will be reserved for a future publication.

Notes

[1]See in particular S. Krashen, T. Terrel, The Natural Approach (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), for the method, the theory and a bibliography.

[2]For a critical analysis see G. Bibeau, "La theorie du moniteur de Krashen," Bulletin de l'Association Canadienne de Linguistique Appliquee, (1983) 101-123.

[3]See The Natural Approach, pp. 7-17.

[4]Maturation plays a part in this process for children, obviously, but that is precisely the point: the "child-language-acquisition model" must be used with great caution since our mature students are not children. Some students who do not have 'a good ear' require explicit correction, others do not. See The Natural Approach, pp. 45-47.

[5]See T. Terrel, "The Natural Approach to Language Teaching: an Update " Modern Language Journal, 66 (1980) 121-131, and Roger Brown, A First Language (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973); R. Brown, C. Cazden and U. Bellugi, "The Child's Grammar from One to Three." In Studies in Child Language Development. Ed. C. Ferguson and D. Slobin, (New York: Holt, Reinhardt and Winston, 1973).

[6]The partial displacement of the traditional grammar-translation model occurred later in Saskatchewan than in parts of the United States. None of this methodology is "completely new" of course: When Montaigne's father in the sixteenth century wished him to learn Latin in an effective and direct manner, he obtained the services of a Latin master from Germany who was instructed to communicate with young Michel only in Latin every day, thus using effectively what we call the Direct Method or the Natural Method. Other members of wealthy families often sent their children to live with a family in the foreign country or obtained the services of a live-in Private Tutor who spoke the foreign langage in the home environment.

[7]For a balanced view of language teaching, see J. P. B. Allen, A Three-Level Curriculum Model for Second Language Education (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1980); H. H. Stern, Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); H. J. Krumm, "Nur die Kuh gibt Milch, wenn Musik erklingt" Zielsprache Deutsch, IV (1983) 3-15; Mary Finocchiaro and Michael Bonomo, The Foreign Language Learner: A Guide for Teachers (New York: Regents Publishing Company, 1973); and H. D. Brown, Principles of Language Teaching and Learning (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980).